Glandular fever

Glandular fever is an infection caused by the Epstein Barr virus. It is also called Infectious Mononucleosis and sometimes the ‘kissing disease’.

Once a person catches Epstein Barr virus (EBV), it is believed that the virus remains in his or her body for life, though it usually does not cause further illness. By adulthood, 90 to 95% of people have been infected with EBV.

How glandular fever is spread

Glandular fever is spread from person-to-person through contact with saliva. Young children may be infected by saliva on the hands of care givers or by sucking and sharing toys, but the virus does not survive very well in the environment. Kissing results in spread among young adults.

Signs and symptoms

Symptoms of glandular fever include:

- fever
- sore throat
- swollen glands
- abdominal pain and jaundice (yellowing of skin and eyes) occur less frequently.

Symptoms most often occurs in older children and young adults. When the infection occurs in young children, symptoms are mild or absent. Up to 50% of people infected have no symptoms of infection at all.

The illness can last between one and several weeks and very rarely a chronic form develops. Illness can be more severe in those who have lowered immunity and in some ethnic groups serious complications may occur many years after the initial infection.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis is made by a blood test.

Incubation period

(time between becoming infected and developing symptoms)

4 to 6 weeks.

Infectious period

(time during which an infected person can infect others)

Not accurately known. The virus is shed in the saliva for up to a year after illness and every so often after that.

Treatment

Seek medical advice if difficulty with swallowing or abdominal pain occurs.

Medication for control of fever may be required. Aspirin should not be given to children under 12 years of age unless specifically recommended by a doctor.

There is no effective antiviral drug available.

Contact sports and heavy lifting should be avoided for the first month after illness because of risk of damage to the spleen, which often is enlarged during acute infection.

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Most patients with glandular fever recover uneventfully.

Prevention

- Exclusion from childcare, preschool, school and work is not necessary.
- There is no vaccine available to prevent Epstein Barr virus infection.
- Follow good hand washing techniques.
- Minimise contact with saliva.
- Avoid sharing cups and glasses.

Useful links

- Wash, Wipe, Cover: www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/WashWipeCover

You've Got What? 5th Edition

Communicable Disease Control Branch
Telephone: 1300 232 272
Email: HealthCommunicableDiseases@sa.gov.au
The SA Health Disclaimer for this resource is located at
www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/youvegotwhat

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